

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7063

INFO ALL EC CAPITALS

AMCONSUL BORDEAUX

AMCONSUL LYON

AMCONSUL MARSEILLE

AMCONSUL NICE

AMCONSUL STRASBOURG

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E.O. 11652: PGOV, PINT, FR

SUBJECT: RAYMOND BARRE: TODAY AND TOMORROW

REF: PARIS 29657

SUMMARY. IN LATE AUGUST, AS RAYMOND BARRE APPROACHED THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF HIS PRIME MINISTRYSHIP, SPE- CULATION ABOUT HIS IMMINENT DEPARTURE WAS RAMPANT. TWO YEARS IS ABOUT THE NORMAL TERM IN THAT JOB, SO THE THEORY WENT; BARRE'S POPULARITY WAS WEARING THIN AMONG THE PUBLIC, AND GISCARD NEEDED ANOTHER MAN TO GIVE THE GOVERNMENT A PSYCHOLOGICAL BOOST AND A NEW IMAGE. JUST AS QUICKLY, THE GOVERNMENT SEMINAR AT RAMBOUILLET ON SEPTEMBER 1 - 2, WHERE VGE PREACHED TOGETHERNESS AND REPEATED HIS CONFIDENCE IN BARRE, HAS STILLED THESE RUMORS. WHILE PREDICTIONS ARE RISKY AND SUBJECT TO NUM- EROUS RESERVATIONS, BARRE LOOKS FAIRLY SECURE IN HIS JOB FOR THE NEXT SIX MONTHS AT LEAST, AND PROBABLY A GOOD DEAL LONGER. HE IS THE AGENT AND THE FLAK-CATCHER

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OF GISCARD'S EFFORT TO RESTRUCTURE THE FRENCH ECONOMY. AS LONG AS THAT POLICY IS ACTIVELY PURSUED, HIS DOUBLE ROLE WILL PROBABLY REMAIN USEFUL TO GISCARD. BY THE SAME TOKEN, IF THE POLICY BECOMES TOO MUCH OF A POLITI- CAL LIABILITY, BARRE IS EXPENDABLE (SEE REFTEL). ONE POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE, COMPATIBLE BOTH WITH A POSSIBLE FUTURE GISCARDIAN DECISION TO EASE UP ON ECONOMIC AUS-

TERITY AND WITH BARRE'S GROWING POLITICAL AMBITIONS, WOULD BE TO PUT BARRE AT THE HEAD OF THE UDF LIST FOR THE EC PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS NEXT JUNE. END SUMMARY.

1. THE (UN)CHANGING IMAGE: RAYMOND BARRE WAS VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN TWO YEARS AGO ON ENTERING THE MATIGNON. INTRODUCED TO THE NATION BY THE PRESIDENT AS THE FOREMOST ECONOMIST IN FRANCE, THE NEW PRIME MINISTER HAD A SINGLE-PURPOSE JOB TO ACCOMPLISH: REDUCE INFLATION. HE ACQUITTED HIMSELF RELATIVELY WELL IN THIS TASK, ALTHOUGH WITHOUT SPECTACULAR SUCCESS. IN ADDITION, HE BROUGHT A REFRESHING TOUCH TO FRENCH POLITICS BY TALKING STRAIGHT, TELLING THE FRENCH THAT CERTAIN SACRIFICES WERE THE ONLY WAY TO LIVE WITHIN THE COUNTRY'S MEANS. PREACHING AUSTERITY DURING THE LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGN WAS NO EASY FEAT, YET HE MADE A MINIMUM OF COMPROMISES AND EVEN SHOWED HIMSELF AN AGGRESSIVE CAMPAIGNER AGAINST THE LEFT. HIS MARCH 1977 TELEVISION DEBATE AGAINST MITTERRAND PROBABLY DID MORE THAN ANY OTHER SINGLE EVENT TO MAKE HIM A NATIONAL FIGURE; AND WHILE FEW NOW MAY REMEMBER THE "BARRE CONFIDENCE" CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED SHORTLY BEFORE THE MARCH ELECTIONS, IT HELPED PLANT THE PRIME MINISTER IN THE PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS. BARRE CAN RIGHTLY FEEL IN RETROSPECT THAT HE SOMEHOW, IN SOME UNQUANTIFIABLE WAY, CONTRIBUTED TO THE MAJORITY'S VICTORS IN MARCH. HE HAS THUS ALMOST UNNOTICEABLY OVER A TWO-YEAR PERIOD TRANSFORMED

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HIS REPUTATION AMONG THE PUBLIC FOR CONSISTENCY, SERIOUSNESS AND HONESTY INTO BECOMING ONE OF THE HANDFUL OF BEST-KNOWN POLITICAL FIGURES IN FRANCE TODAY.

2. THE POLITICIAN: EVER SINCE BARRE'S INVESTITURE, THE FRENCH HAVE BEEN ASKING WHEN HE WOULD SUDDENLY STEP OUT OF HIS ECONOMIC STRAIGHT-JACKET AND ASSUME A POLITICAL ROLE. BARRE HIMSELF REJECTS THIS DICHOTOMY OF ROLES. HE DESCRIBES HIS JOB AS ONE OF SOLVING REAL PROBLEMS (ECONOMIC, POLITICAL OR OTHER) AND LEAVES TECHNICAL, INTRAPARTY MANEUVERING TO OTHERS. BUT IN REALITY, BARRE HAS REMAINED LESS ALOOF FROM THE NITTY-GRITTY OF POLITICS THAN HE LETS ON, AND HE HAS SHOWN HE CAN HOLD HIS OWN. HE HAS, FOR INSTANCE,

-- REFUSED TO TAKE OVER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE UDF DESPITE THE URGINGS OF GISCARD AND MAINTAINS THE PARTIAL FICTION THAT UNDER THE FIFTH REPUBLIC THE PRIME MINISTER IS THE LEADER OF THE ENTIRE MAJORITY (INCLUDING THE RPR);
-- MADE AN IMPORTANT GESTURE TO THE RPR IN TAKING A LOCAL RPR POLITICIAN FROM LYON AS HIS STAND-IN IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, WHERE THE USUAL

PRACTICE IS TO CHOOSE SOMEONE FROM HIS OWN

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PARTY;

-- AVOIDED BECOMING EMBROILED IN THE GISCARD/CHIRAC AND UDF/RPR RIVALRIES, WHILE MAINTAINING HIS ABSOLUTE LOYALTY TO THE PRESIDENT;
-- CAREFULLY NURTURED THE FAVORS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST GROUPS AND SOCIAL SECTORS IN SELECTED TRAVELS AND THROUGH THE PRESS.

MOST IMPORTANT, BARRE HAS DONE ALL THESE THINGS IN MODERATION, IN A WAY AS NOT TO INCUR THE SUSPICIONS OF HIS BOSS. HIS PERSONAL POPULARITY REMAINS LOW, USUALLY IN THE LOW FORTIES, PRIMARILY BECAUSE OF THE LACK OF SUCCESS IN THE PUBLIC'S EYE, OF HIS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICIES AND ALSO BECAUSE OF HIS GENERALLY LOW PROFILE FOR A PRIME MINISTER. THIS UNPOPULARITY CONVENIENTLY SERVES TWO PURPOSES: IT DRAWS FIRE AWAY FROM THE PRESIDENT ON THE ECONOMIC FRONT AND ALLOWS AS AN ULTIMATE STEP THE PRESIDENT TO BLAME HIM FOR AN EVENTUAL FAILURE;

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AND IT NEUTRALIZES ANY RIVALRY BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND A POTENTIALLY OVERLY AMBITIOUS PRIME MINISTER.

3. BARRE TODAY: MANY HAVE CHARACTERIZED BARRE SIMPLY AS THE BENEVOLENT LIGHTNING ROD OF THE PRESIDENT, SACRIFICING HIMSELF FOR THE SURVIVAL OF THE PRESIDENT AND THE REGIME. FOR BARRE'S ECONOMIC POLICIES HAVE BECOME THE FOCUS OF THE MOST INTENSE CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT TODAY. THE OPPOSITION OF COURSE BLAMES HIM PERSONALLY FOR WHAT IT CONSIDERS FAILURE ACROSS THE ECONOMIC BOARD AND BRANDS HIS NEO-LIBERALISM OF UNCONTROLLED PRICES AS AN ADDITIONAL INDUCEMENT FOR INFLATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT. THE RPR, WHICH GAVE ONLY LUKEWARM SUPPORT FOR HIS AUSTERITY PLAN BEFORE MARCH, NOW OPENLY AND REPEATEDLY CRITICIZES BARRE ON A WHOLE RANGE OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES. MORE SURPRISINGLY, UDF DEPUTIES HAVE BEEN SHOWING INCREASING NERVOUSNESS OVER GOVERNMENT POLICIES, BECAUSE OF UNEMPLOYMENT BACK HOME. IN A RECENT SOFRES POLL, 52 PERCENT OF THE FRENCH PUBLIC EXPRESSED PESSIMISM ABOUT BARRE'S ABILITY TO COPE WITH FRANCE'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, WHILE 41 PERCENT ARE OPTIMISTIC (VERSUS 44 PERCENT TWO MONTHS AGO). ACCORDING TO AN IFOP/LE POINT POLL THIS WEEK, ONLY 28 PERCENT APPROVE THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC POLICIES WHILE 44 PERCENT OPPOSE (ALTHOUGH THEY SPLIT 37/34 IN FAVOR OF BARRE STAYING AT THE HEAD OF THE GOVERNMENT).

4. IN THE FACE OF THESE CRITICISMS, BARRE FEARLESSLY INSISTS THAT HIS ANALYSIS IS THE ONLY RIGHT ONE FOR FRANCE TODAY AND THAT HE DOES NOT INTEND TO CHANGE ONE IOTA BECAUSE OF TEMPORARY MISGIVINGS BY A FEW (UNINITIATED) DOUBTERS. WHERE HE WENT GALLOPING OFF IN HIS FIRST YEAR TO SEVER THE HEAD OF THE INFLATIONIST DRAGON, HE

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NOW FINDS SOLACE IN ADVOCATING THE VIRTUES OF HARD WORK, COMPETITION AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY -- NONE OF THEM PARTICULARLY POPULAR THEMES IN FRANCE. HE LEAVES NO ONE IN DOUBT, IN REPEATED SPEECHES NOW KNOWN BY HEART BY A MEDIA-CONSCIOUS PUBLIC, THAT HE IS ABSOLUTELY CONVINCED OF THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF HIS CAUSE AND THAT GIVEN ENOUGH TIME, EVENTS WILL BEAR HIM OUT. AFTER ALL, DIDN'T THE ELECTORATE RETURN A COMFORTABLE MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT IN MARCH DESPITE THE UNPOPULARITY OF HIS AUSTERITY PROGRAM? GRUMBLING OVER HIS ECONOMIC POLICIES IS ATTRIBUTED TO A NATURAL TRAIT OF FRENCHMEN, WHO

CONSTANTLY FEEL THE NEED TO VENT THEIR DISPLEASURE AND
HOLD SOMEONE RESPONSIBLE.

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5. BARRE'S FUTURE: BARRE IS A DIFFICULT AND FASCINATING PERSON TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND. ONE THING IS SURE: HE IS NOT THE OPEN BOOK HE PRETENDS TO BE. HE HAS CHANGED CONSIDERABLY IN THE LAST TWO YEARS, ALL THE TIME REMAINING PRIMARILY AN ECONOMIST AND TRUE TO HIS ORIGINAL IDEAS. FROM BEING ORIGINALLY A ONE-ISSUE MAN (INFLATION), BARRE HAS SUBSEQUENTLY CHALKED UP ADDITIONAL POINTS TO HIS CREDIT. HE CAMPAIGNED HARD AND EFFECTIVELY FOR THE MARCH VICTORY, HAS INITIATED SINCE MARCH A FUNDAMENTAL REFORM OF THE FRENCH ECONOMY AND COORDINATES FAIRLY SMOOTHLY THE GOVERNMENT'S OVERALL ACTIVITIES. ONE AREA WHERE HE HAS BEEN CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT IS THE PRESIDENT'S GRAND STRATEGY OF RECONCILING THE NON-COMMUNIST LEFT WITH THE LIBERAL, REFORMIST TRADITION. BARRE'S MAJOR SHORTCOMING, WHICH DISTINGUISHES HIM FROM POMPIDOU (BARRE DOES NOTHING TO DISCOURAGE THESE COMPARISONS), IS

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HIS LACK OF SUPPORT FROM A MAJOR POLITICAL PARTY -- AT HIS OWN CHOOSING, IT SHOULD BE ADDED.

6. DO THESE PLUSES AND MINUSES PREDICT A SHORT OR LONG STAY AT THE MATIGNON, AND WHAT AFTER THAT? REMAINING THERE UNTIL WELL INTO 1979 WOULD MAKE SENSE ECONOMICALLY, PARTICULARLY AFTER THE REPEATED ENDORSEMENTS OF GISCARD. GISCARD HAS EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUED EFFORTS TO RETURN FRANCE TO A HEALTHY ECONOMY, AND BARRE CAN AT LEAST BE COUNTED ON FOR CONSISTENCY ON THIS SCORE. IN ADDITION, OTHER POTENTIAL SUCCESSORS SUCH AS ECONOMICS MINISTER MONORY, JUSTICE MINISTER PEYREFITTE, FOREIGN TRADE MINISTER DENIAU AND SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE ELYSEE FRANCOIS- PONCET SEEM LESS PROVEN THAN BARRE TO FIT THIS PARTICULAR BILL. FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD SOME OBSERVERS SEE BARRE MOVED IN TIME TO ASSUME THE LEADERSHIP OF THE UDF LIST BEFORE THE EC ELECTIONS NEXT JUNE. SUCH A CHANGE WOULD OFFER ADVANTAGES AT BOTH THE PRESIDENT AND BARRE. IT WOULD GIVE THE PRESIDENT AN OPTION OF EASING UP ON THE ECONOMY AT SOME POINT BEFORE THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, AND IT WOULD GIVE BARRE THE INDISPENSABLE APPARATUS HE NOW LACKS FOR THE GREATER POLITICAL CALLING HE NO DOUBT SECRETLY HARBORS.

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